

Alienation in a Universe of Presence

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Alienation is, in some sense, the oldest and most universal issue that humans have ever faced. It is the issue of ourselves as human, our human condition, the difficulty of discovering our personal identity and our proper place in the universe. In our western civilization, particularly, it is the issue of authentic existence while moving through a series of historical phases with constant stress on achieving new life orientations and new adjustments to our own being and to the larger Earth community. But while alienation is indeed an ancient issue, it is one that has occurred from the 19th century to the present with a certain severity. Alienation of the workman from the means and benefits of his production was the central social issue from the Manifesto of Karl Marx in 1848 until the dissolution of the Soviet regime in 1991. Alienation of the authentic self from the false self that we adopt has been a central issue in psychotherapy from the early 20th century. Alienation was especially manifest in the counter-cultural movements in the 1960s with its dramatic protest against what was perceived as a violent dehumanization of life.

In the opening years of the 21st century we have a new experience of alienation in our inability to relate effectively to the integral functioning of the Earth. This alienation, based in an extreme anthropocentrism and expressed in an addictive consumerism, is leading to a devastating exploitation of the planet — supposedly for human advantage. Until recently there has been little realization of the extent to which human fulfillment depends on the integral functioning of the Earth in all the grandeur of its natural scenery, its forests, its mountains, its woodlands and